

This Is the Time and This Is the Record of the Time

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LevArText

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In *At any given moment*, various spaces and temporalities are activated through a rich diversity of theatrical and visual effects. The piece makes me think of a song by the American artist Laurie Anderson, *From the Air*, in which she traces out the distinction between time and its documentation – *this is the time and this is the record of the time*. *At any given moment* works on a personal as well as a universal level in that it encourages us to explore our perception of time and space from a shared present time that looks back on the past.

At the start of the piece I walk down into a subterranean vault, where I am met by a guide – a person wearing an unspecified blue uniform – who asks me to tacitly consider the room in which we are standing. I am told that the room originates from some time between 1650 and 1750, but that little is known of its past. The vault dressed with clay is whitewashed and bare (like a white cube), but the guide presents me with clues to lead me in search of lost time: ... *distance created by stones – unknown hands lays, lifts, lays, lifts*.¹ I look around and spot a small area on the wall where the original bricks have been preserved. I contemplate, inhale and fill the space with workers, voices, the smell of sweat and hammer blows. What were they thinking? Who were they? What were they part of? Soon this train of thought is contrasted to the bourgeois circumstances of me wandering inside a work of art on an early Tuesday afternoon. Because wandering also plays a part. The guide brings me up to the street level and leads me slowly through the townscape. Wordless still, we drift through the urban landscape while I savour this rare opportunity to consider my own time from a distance, as a spectator. Out of sync with my surroundings, I become a witness of the lives of others – on their way to work, kindergarten, the shop. Slowly and silently, we move forward in a timeless space until we finally reach a door sign that reads *At any given moment*.

It soon becomes clear that we are headed down towards another vault. Once inside this damp cellar, the guide encourages me to move around: ... *can you feel time – can you touch it with your hands – how does it sound to you, how does it smell?* As I feel my way forward in the pitch-dark, relying on my tactile senses, I notice how the smell of the old soil sticks to my hands and clothes. Deprived of vision, I soon feel insecure and my remaining senses are activated. After a while, it seems to become lighter, but what at first feels like my eyes getting accustomed to the dark, actually turns out to be a subtle and staged lighting. Different parts of the room are carefully lit, but as my body instinctively turns towards the light, the latter appears to release its hold – over and over again.

What am I a part of here? The guide no doubt plays a central role in *At any given moment*, and this aspect enables a reading of the piece in terms of “constructed situations”. These are by definition ephemeral works documented only in the mind of the spectator, works in which the whole situation is activated by individuals who have been directed, a guide in this instance. From a traditional perspective, the artistic medium is typically defined as a specific material object (like a canvas or stone). In constructed situations, however, the medium is the actual interaction, and the artwork is what takes place between the viewer and the guide. With the assistance of the guide – a character that could be said to resemble the guide in medieval visionary poetry – and the elements that appear before me (the people in the street, the cars, stones, the clay dressing), I partly compose my own work while taking part. I choose, observe, compare, interpret and draw my own connections. Clear and distinct direction ensures that the question of the active participant versus the passive viewer never becomes an issue. Thus, it is possible to understand *At any given moment* as a critique of art projects that further participation before contemplation, for the purpose of erasing the role of the spectator. This not only applies to the person invited. I suspect that the guide, as well as passers-by in the street, is also balancing the boundaries between participation and observation. One can only wonder at the guide’s experience with previous compositions, and out in the street again, I notice many people stopping at the sight of me and my blue-clad companion.

Precisely because the constants time and space are so important, *At any given moment* cannot be understood purely in terms of interaction and participation. Time plays a part on various levels in the two vaults. Our thoughts are directed not only towards a time that is lost, but also towards the decision to excavate the substratum of towns and cities – a result of our time. Today, we take interest in digging underneath houses, through the gutters, rubbish heaps and latrines, in search of a daily life that cannot be found in old town maps and paintings (which rather displayed desires and ideals). The vaults that were once part of everyday life are now closed spaces into which we need an invitation to enter. We can be invited into these chambers as culturally charged zones (like relics and historical monuments), but with the invitation that accompanies *At any given moment*, the rooms are transformed into works of art – and similarly, the streets outside. Through some kind of transitional ritual that is tied up with a change in status, an interruption is produced, which forms a reservoir to our imagination. In the vaults, as well as in the street, we are pulled out of our own time, perhaps even out of ourselves – similar to the inventive play of children.

In this way, the piece can also be understood in terms of an installation whose medium or material is precisely the space itself. That, however, does not mean that installations are immaterial. On the contrary, installations are more material than anything – not only due to their spatial extension, but because the state of being inside a walled space is the most fundamental definition of what constitutes materiality. Moreover, the installation reveals the materiality of society in that it installs (and places) what we surround ourselves with, but perhaps seldom reflect upon. The installation may invoke a critical vigilance to our surroundings and provide the possibility to reflect upon our daily life in new ways. It is perhaps more fitting to understand this piece in terms of “total installations”, a form of installation that takes up the entirety of available space. A total installation surrounds the viewer, and the effect is art that *creates* atmospheres. The clear distinction between the artist and the viewer is erased, and, as the artist Emilia Kabakov states, the viewers become the characters in the art that is taking place all around them. With time and space functioning

as this piece's dimensional constants, it can be said to point towards the dissolving of the distinction between "art" and "life". In my encounter with the somewhat absurd door sign, I realise that I am a *character* in the art that surrounds me. The sign draws my attention to the fact that I (with the assistance of the guide) have turned the street level into a part of the installation. While I have been wandering in silence with my guide, I have installed the town, the people, the river and the church wall. *This is the time and this is the record of the time.*

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